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CIA Director William Casey says journalists have seriously hurt U.S. intelligence sources "of the highest value" and jeopardized national security in recent years by publishing classified information.

He said publication of the leaks hands the Soviet KGB and other hostile intelligence organizations information "on a silver platter" that they would otherwise spend billions of dollars trying to acquire.

Speaking Wednesday at the American Society of Newspaper Editors meeting, Casey said he did not want to prevent reporters from getting "the information the public needs and should have," but insisted "it's a very delicate and difficult balance to strike."

Casey said he has offered to consult with editors before they print classified information and said the CIA has stepped up efforts to identify leakers. New, tougher laws may be needed to punish federal employees who divulge secrets, he said.

"Leakers are costing the taxpayers millions and even billions of dollars -- and, more important, putting Americans abroad as well as our country itself at risk," he told the 900 newspaper executives.

"In recent years, publication of classified information by the media has destroyed or seriously damaged intelligence sources of the highest value," Casey said.

"Every method we have of acquiring intelligence -- our agents, our relationships with other security services, our photographic and electronic capabilities, the information we get from communications -- has been damaged by the publication of unauthorized disclosures."

Howard Simons, former editor of The Washington Post and now curator of the Nieman Foundation for journalists, said reporters in Washington cannot do their jobs without publishing some information the government deems secret.

The government routinely classifies thousands of documents to avoid embarrassment, not to protect national security, Simons said. But he acknowledged that editors should not publish every secret that crosses their desks.

Casey agreed editors have often shown "admirable restraint" when asked to hold information that would endanger the nation.

The CIA chief said he was puzzled, however, by the fact newspapers are willing to expose waste, corruption and other government misconduct, but rarely take a public servant to task for revealing classified information.